

Thriving in Academe

REFLECTIONS ON HELPING STUDENTS LEARN

Thriving in Academe is a joint project of NEA and the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (www.podnetwork.org). For more information, contact the editor, Douglas Robertson (drobert@fiu.edu) at Florida International University or Mary Ellen Flannery (mflannery@nea.org) at NEA.

■ A Better Way to Grade

Our current grading system is broken. It doesn't work well for faculty, students, post-secondary institutions, or prospective employers of our graduates. Consider this alternative system that restores rigor, motivates students, and saves you grading time.

**BY LINDA B. NILSON,
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Grading is often the least favorite part of faculty's job, and as course loads and class sizes grow, it takes more and more of our time. Decisions around partial credit, which students expect for any vaguely correct statement, and justifications for point deductions, can take considerable hours for us to make.

And still, students complain. They're stressed out, too—and also pressured to play the “college game,” which rewards those who snag the best grades with the least possible investment of time and effort.

At the same time, our colleges and universities put little stock in our grades because they don't always translate into outcomes achieved. Do A's really certify that students achieved all course outcomes at a high level of competency? Do B's, C's, and D's imply achievement of some outcomes and not others? If so, why are students passing? As faculty, we know a passing grade doesn't guarantee competency in any of our outcomes. But if we failed students for not demonstrating competency in all of our outcomes, we would get into trouble with the very administrators who discredit our grades.

Meanwhile, for employers, grades only weakly predict on-the-job success. In fact, grades and academic test scores explain only 2.4 percent of the variance in career success.

There must be—and there is—a better way to grade. Let me describe a new system, called specifications or “specs” grading, in three parts.

that formula or whatever part of the formula is important for your students to learn and follow. The specs should also require that the work be submitted on time.

With that in mind, using “specs” grading, complete, satisfactory, on-time work either receives all the possible points or counts towards the course grade, while incomplete, unsatisfactory, or late work receives no points or credit and may be returned for revision. For the students, it’s all or nothing—no sliding by, no blowing off the directions, and no betting on partial credit for sloppy, last-minute work.

At least a couple of dozen faculty have tried pass/fail grading of assignments and tests (see references and Nilson, 2015), and all who have shared their results report that this type of grading increases student motivation and produces higher-quality student work.

Tokens

How about adding some flexibility to the system while also rewarding wise planning, promptness, and quality? Students start the term with one, two, or three tokens that they can exchange for a 24-hour deadline extension or the chance to revise unsatisfactory work, take a make-up exam, or be absent or late to class without penalty. You might also allow them to earn tokens by submitting satisfactory work early, doing an additional assignment, having perfect atten-

dance, or doing truly outstanding work.

Of course, students who consistently submit work on time, submit satisfactory work the first time, attend class regularly, and arrive on time will not have to use their tokens. At the end of the course, you might let them exchange some number of their tokens for dropping their lowest-graded quiz, skipping the final exam, or getting some other coveted reward.

“FOR STUDENTS, IT’S ALL OR NOTHING — NO SLIDING BY, NO BLOWING OFF THE DIRECTIONS, NO BETTING ON PARTIAL CREDIT.”

Bundles

Add one more element to pass/fail grading and the token system: the student’s freedom to choose among bundles of specs-graded assignments and tests, each bundle associated with a different final grade. Higher course grades require completing more and/or more challenging work, and each assignment or test must pass the specs requirement in order to count. So students decide the amount of time and effort they will put into a class, depending upon the grade they want. However, we should

encourage our students, especially first-generation college students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to aim for the A.

Examine your current assignments and tests, including papers, reflections, problem sets, programs, and designs. Try grouping them into three, four, or even ten bundles, some not very challenging, some very challenging, and some in the middle. Number each bundle so that the lower numbers designate easier work, while the higher numbers designate more demanding and higher-level thinking work, such as those involving evaluation and creation. Then associate the bundles with course grades, perhaps like this:

- For a D, students have to complete Bundles 1, 2, and 3.
- For a C, they have to complete Bundles 1 through 5.
- For a B, they have to complete Bundles 1 through 8.
- And for an A, all ten bundles.

Here is another model that links each bundle to the outcomes achieved by completing it:

- For a D (or F), students fail to complete Bundle 1.
- For a C, they complete Bundle 1, which is averaging 70 percent or higher across objective exams that require and demonstrate knowl-



■ BEST PRACTICES > MORE SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE, AND HIGHER LEVELS OF THINKING

When Dr. Kathleen Kegley taught plant medicine at Clemson University, she designed bundles to reward students for mastering more content—specifically, knowledge of the physiology, pathologies, and treatment strategies for more plants. Students earned a C for averaging 70 percent or higher across the objective exams, which assessed their

abilities to grossly classify plants, pathologies, and treatments. For a B, students had to meet the C requirement and complete assignments that went into more detail on six different plants. For an A, students had to meet the B requirements and complete assignments on six more plants, for a total of twelve. In other words, they had to master more material, but

all at the same cognitive level, to attain a higher grade.

At Western Illinois University, Dr. Laurence L. Leff offers his computer science students a range of assignments of varying difficulty. For a C, students must do only the easiest six assignments. For a B, they must do the intermediate six assignments. And for an A,

they must do the most difficult six assignments. Note: Students complete the same number of assignments no matter which grade they are aiming for. Those who want an A do not carry a heavier workload, although more challenging work may take more time.



Meet Linda Nilson



Linda B. Nilson, Ph.D., is founding director of Clemson University's Office of Teaching Effectiveness and Innovation. Previously,

she directed teaching centers at Vanderbilt University and UC–Riverside, and taught sociology at UCLA. She has authored *Teaching at Its Best*, *The Graphic Syllabus and the Outcomes Map*, *Creating Self-Regulated Learners*, and *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time*, a recent book that provides much more information about the grading system described in this *Thriving in Academe* article. She also co-edited *Enhancing Learning with Laptops in the Classroom* and volumes 25–28 of *To Improve the Academy*. She presents teaching-related workshops and keynotes at universities and conferences nationally and internationally. She can be reached at nilson@clemson.edu.

Pass/Fail grading

First note that we are not talking about pass/fail grading of courses, which rarely induce students to do their best. In specification or “specs” grading, students earn either full credit or none for assignments and tests, depending on whether they meet the specifications that you laid out. Think of a one-level rubric with a description of a satisfactory, passing product, and set the bar for passing at B- and maybe A-grade work to uphold rigor and high academic standards.

The most demanding work for you will be writing the specs. You must describe exactly what you want to see in the assignment or test, and you must use language that students can understand. Your specs may be as simple as “completeness”— all the questions are answered or all the problems are set up correctly, or the student followed the directions and met a minimum length. Or the specs may be a more complex, detailed description of, for example, the characteristics of a good literature review, or the contents of each section of a proposal, or even the paragraph-by-para-

graph organization of the type of paper or report you want.

In fact, most of our assignments for students follow a formula. Our job is to lay out

TALES FROM REAL LIFE > REMEMBERING RIGOR

When the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the first satellite in space, in 1957, suddenly Americans were enamored with science, math, technology, and educating the next generation for global competition. Pushed and generously funded by the govern-

ment, our academic institutions went from “good” to among the best in the world.

I was part of the “Sputnik generation” that faced considerable pressure to master a packed curriculum. If we failed, we faced consequences, possibly repeating a grade. Con-

versely, if we excelled in school or academic competitions, we received awards. But only the best received them. The education was rigorous, and we were challenged and motivated to learn and achieve.

Maybe the system was elitist and several other

“ists.” But since then, in our effort to educate a broader, more diverse population, we have abandoned rigor and the motivation it inspires. Our international test scores and rankings have plummeted, grade inflation has raged, and this sad decline has generated exposés like *Academi-*

cally Adrift and *The Smartest Kids in the World* and *How They Got That Way*.

We did not have to give up rigor and the drive to achieve, and I propose bringing them back with a new grading system. For the sake of our students, we can do this!

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